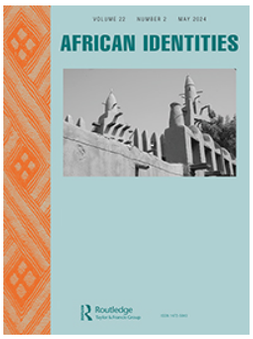

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ARTICLE

Bare life and subjectivity in post-Independence era: the figure of *homo sacer* in selected Southern African narratives

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ABSTRACT

The demise of Apartheid and colonialism in South Africa and Zimbabwe ushered in hope among the masses, who expected transformation to improve their economic, political and social conditions. However, context and history conspired to orchestrate persistent suffering, uncertainty and existential angst, which find expression in literary works. Drawing from Agamben's concept of biopolitics, we interrogate fictional representations of economic and socio-political conditions in post-apartheid South Africa and post-independent Zimbabwe. We analyse how writers portray post-colonial conditions, as shaping and creating the figure of *homo Sacer*. The study focuses on Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope*, Mhlongo's *After Tears* and Moele's *Room 207*, to assess how writers portray the post-independence subject, as embodying precarity in spaces that ought to have afforded them dignity and hope. The Foucault-Agamben connection and Mbembe's notions of conviviality and necropolitics are used to explain the deplorable conditions of citizens. The texts convey ambiguities and paradoxes generated from sovereign power that have the potential to reduce citizens and non-citizens to a naked existence. The novels satirise and subvert sovereign power for poor governance, corruption and political betrayal, which have bred anxiety, disillusionment, inequalities, marginalisation and poverty among ordinary people, as summed up in Agamben's notion of bare life.

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Introduction

The attainment of independence by many African countries, including Zimbabwe and South Africa, was a welcome relief for the masses who had, for a long time, endured racial discrimination, political suppression, social exclusion and economic deprivation during colonial and apartheid times. It is this background that inspired mass jubilation and great excitement at independence across the continent. Yet, the new dispensations have not birthed radically different systems from the old ones and so the unfolding conditions and treatment of citizens/non-citizens by black governments in post-colonial societies, become the most perplexing and bewildering scenarios. The indigenous people's quest

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for rehumanisation is unfulfilled as the new political leaders turn against the same people they fought to free from colonisation times and adopt replica oppressive mechanisms of power to silence any dissenting voices. The paradox is that whereas colonial/apartheid societies privileged the few over the many, the acknowledged 'free' societies adopt the same flawed binaries. Ordinary citizens are puzzled as they watch helplessly their endangered and ungrievable lives that become bare.

Synopses of selected novels

The Uncertainty of Hope is a novel by a Zimbabwean writer, Valerie Tagwira (2006), set in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. The novel portrays existential hardships faced by Mbare residents in the face of a collapsing economy. The daily experience of ordinary city-dwellers is characterised by untold suffering, emanating from poor service delivery, shortage of basic commodities, hunger, despair and uncertainty.

Nicholas Mhlongo's (2007) *After Tears* and Kgebelti Moele's (2006) *Room 207*, are South African narratives published in post-apartheid era. Both texts depict very insightful and troubling ways, enduring problems, such as the binary logics of de/coloniality and structured conceptualisations of humanity, which seem to inform the present exclusionary practices and egoisms in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel *After Tears*, is a story about Bafana Kuzwayo, who has just failed his law degree at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Bafana does not tell his family the truth that he failed his degree, and pretends he has a debt of R22,000 in arrears for fees. Rea, who is Bafana's mother, makes frantic efforts to ensure that her son gets the results and becomes an advocate. She advertises their 'Chi' house for sale and in the process, uncovers a family secret.

The plot of *Room 207* follows the life stories of six young male characters who live in a rented one-roomed apartment for eleven years in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, South Africa. These young South Africans migrate to the city to fulfil their dreams of getting a good university education and formal employment, making them participate in the envied upward social mobility. However, in the city, dreams and hopes are replaced by despair, frustration and a sense of failure. The narratives project the paradoxes and controversies surrounding conversations about social and race relations in the post-apartheid era and un/belonging in contemporary national space/s where structures of surveillance still persist. Ironically, the novel troubles the national/ stranger dichotomy. Despite the fact that these texts are informed by different socio-economic and political contexts, they have common thematic threads, especially in their gaze on bodies that are ungrievable according to Butler's (2004) understanding, lives that have been pushed to zones of non-being and denied meaningful existence. The engagement with both Zimbabwean and South African literary works is purposefully meant to highlight the dis/connections in terms of how the chosen novels grapple with the unpleasant realities of biopolitical and necropolitical mechanisms of subjugations and surveillance.

Agamben interpretive framework

The reading and textual interpretation of the selected literary works in this article is informed by Giorgio Agamben's concept of biopolitics. Agamben is an Italian political philosopher who revised Foucault's (1991) conception of biopower. The Foucauldian

notion of biopower refers to a life that is regulated by power and to exercise sovereignty is to have a right to let live or die. Both conceptions of political power and life are corroborated by Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian political philosopher who theorised the management of life through what he calls the necropolitical strategies of the ruling elite. Mbembe (2003, p. 40) posits that 'the sovereign confers the status of "living dead"; to human subjects, there are lives marked for potential death or life'. The convergence of ideas from these three philosophers is essential for an examination of the selected literary texts in this article. Biopolitics and necropolitics provoke conversations about how postcolonial political leadership seeks to regulate life where some lives are deemed ir/relevant and un/worthy of recognition. The brand of politics teases out the paradox of post-independence space, characterised by 'inclusive exclusion'. Independence is in the name of all and yet, only a few reap its benefits. Thus, this article focuses on the tragic utilisation of biopower where some postcolonial subjects are reduced to grievable lives or assume the figure of *homo sacer* [bare life] through destruction of life by biopolitical regimes. *Homo* sacer, is a Latin term that refers to the cursed man who is banned or isolated from society and may be deprived of all rights. The production of bare life, which is wasted, expendable or abandoned, is done by the sovereign power through suspension of law, removal of protection and the creation of death zones for such condemned people, who effectively lose their humanity. According to Agamben (1998, p. 53), 'the *homo sacer* is "a human victim" captured by the sovereign ban, who may be killed and not sacrificed'. The author maintains:

> He who has been banned, is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but is rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and the law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable (Agamben, 1998, pp. 28–29).

Such a person is degraded, animalised, dehumanised and exposed to life-threatening situations from which the law and politics offer no succour. This is a state of abnormality that has been normalised for the figure of *homo sacer*. These insightful ideas are enlightening in the exploration and discussion of postcolonial existential conditions of post-independence subjects.

What comes after tears? The paradox of a harvest of thorns in post-Independence

Kehinde (2004) observes that in the postcolonial era, African fictional space is utilised as a veritable weapon to critique the existential circumstances of post-colonial subjects. In other words, fictional works are sites for languaging and depicting the subaltern's disenchantment with the unfolding reality in the post colonies. What is most striking in the selected novels is that there are ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes inherent in glamorous and sanitised discourses about the rebirth of postcolonial nations, independence and self-rule since the fictional works studied in this article authorise the stories of the post-colonial *homo sacer*, whose life or death is insignificant to the sovereign power (2005/ Agamben, 2000). Considering the periodisation of the liberation struggle and the attainment of independence, Zimbabwe got her political independence first in 1980 and

South Africa's Apartheid rule ended almost a decade and a half later. This difference is pertinent when debating the similarities and differences in terms of the degrees of bare life or even states of exception in each of these countries.

Tagwira's novel, *The Uncertainty of Hope*, offers a stern critique of the ugly realities in the postcolonial Zimbabwean society, such as vast socio-economic imbalances evident in a profound rich-poor divide, perennial petrol queues, poor civil servants, wasted street vendors and urchins, high levels of unemployment, the HIV and AIDS pandemic and runaway corruption. The common man is shocked by what comes 'after tears', which is a harrowing harvest of thorns in reminiscence of Shimmer Chinodya's fictive work. Mavengano (2020) in her reading of postcolonial conditions in both South Africa and Zimbabwe, argues that the aspirations of ordinary people remain unfulfilled despite the fact that the post-colony continues to offer false hope through empty rhetoric, such as the current Mnangagwa's 'Vision 2030: Zimbabwe will attain a middle class economy' and the discourse of a rainbow nation in South Africa.

What is more unsettling is that dissenting voices are labelled undesired 'trash or filth' to be 'punished or disciplined' in Zimbabwean politics. From a biopolitics reading, *Operation Murambatsvina*, which left many urban-dwellers homeless in Zimbabwe, becomes a state commissioned act of power meant to remove undesirable dirty bodies from the public eye of the repressive regime, characterising the political landscape. In its pursuit of power, the Mugabe government does not spare the poor war veterans who are found on the way. It is quite perplexing that loyalists of the ruling party have been indoctrinated and zombified to a level of blaming the West for every challenge encountered in present-day Zimbabwe. A case in point is that of Hondo, a war veteran whose house is demolished during *Operation Murambatsvina*, who blames Britain for such an act of callousness:

> I know who sent you! You are all British puppets; sell-outs, the whole bunch of you . . . I said I fought for this country! Hondo continued raving. He did a mad little dance and burst into a popular war song, which made reference to the blood that had been spilt to secure his beloved country's freedom. *Zimbabwe ndeyeropa baba! Zimbabwe ndeyeropa ramadzibaba!*. (Tagwira, 2006, p. 150)

The sovereign in this case, creates a state of exception in order to justify infliction of violence and punishment upon a people viewed not only as dissident, but potentially subversive. To the extent that these people are constructed as filth, they are, therefore, expendable and beyond the pale of the law.

Sadly, even in the 'Second Republic', the state has not changed much in its brutal dealing with opposing voices that challenge the government in Zimbabwe. The recent recurrence of *Operation Murambatsvina* and abductions of the three female Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) protestors against the government's policies in Harare during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a worrisome scenario in the post-Mugabe era. Apropos of this, Mbembe (2003, p. 19) argues that 'the state uses terror as a necessary part of politics in order to scatter and immobilise the enemy'.

Being neighbours, South Africa should have learned a number of lessons on (mis) governance from the Zimbabwean government. A recollection of the ugly past in the novels, *After Tears* and *Room 207*, serves to foreground South Africa's history and inspires further scholarly conversations about the unchanging postcolonial conditions. The historiography of aesthetics, together with the politics of memory, evoke critical existential

questions about the semantic significance of independence and self-rule in South Africa. The protagonist in *Room 207* sadly observes the enduring power relations in post-apartheid era. The narrative technique in this novel is a convenient tool for articulating the sad story of the previously colonised people, whose fate has not changed in the post-apartheid era. The use of demonstrative pronouns by Moele, invites the reader to have a glimpse of the postcolonial society and witness the prevalent mournable existential circumstances of the post/colonial-apartheid city. Such a scenario is aptly described by Mhlongo's (2004), '*Dog eat dog*', which prompts postcolonial subjects to yearn for re-definition and re-humanisation in Bulawayo's (2013) text, *We need new names*, in order to escape the ordeal of being a foreigner in one's nation as suggested by Jinga's (2012) novel, *One foreigner's ordeal*. An illuminating description of a post-apartheid city is captured in the following passage:

> Johannesburg! It's a city founded by some people. Who cares that they founded it here? The British had their time here and it passed. The Afrikaners had their time; they enjoyed it, and then, it too passed by. Now, Johannesburg is under the control of the black man, his time is here, and, by the looks of things, his time will never pass (Moele, 2006, p. 69).

The narrator uses biting irony in his enunciation of dissatisfaction with the 'stormy rainbow nation' under the leadership of 'the black man' (Moele, 2006, p. 143). The sardonic use of the adjective 'stormy', suggests darkness, precarity and violence that more precisely mirror the subtleties and ambivalence of race, nationality, xenophobic attitudes and ethnicity in South Africa (Nichols, 2019).

The narrative voice in *Room 207* unmasks the numerous disappointments with the government of the African National Congress (ANC) that has left citizens languishing in poverty. Both South African novels present a pessimistic view of life in the post-apartheid era:

> (. . .) if you're black and you failed to get rich in the first year of our democracy when Tata Mandela came to power, you must forget it - you will live in poverty until your beard turns grey (Moele, 2006, p. 15).

This observation is a perfect analysis of the post-apartheid society that retains apartheid and colonial contradictions since it continues to destroy black lives. Mavengano (2020) contends that the images of wasteland, decay and rot in Johannesburg city centre and Soweto Township, amplify the tragic conditions of the black humanity in post-apartheid South African society. The motifs of decay and decomposition and the melancholic tone in the narrative foreground the abject failure of the ruling ANC party since 'people are now living in a rubbish dump, rotting street and buildings' (Moele, 2006, p. 62). Evidently, the dilapidation of the city buildings is a sad black story that projects an alarming post-apartheid South Africa. Johannesburg is a ' . . . dream city', signifying its role as the economic hub for the black youths yet, these 'dreams die each and every minute and each and every second dreams are born' (Moele, 2006, p. 19). Mavengano (2020) notes that in *After Tears*, Soweto Township is a site of ambivalence and inconsistencies because it remains peripheral and retains its apartheid architecture. She adds that Hillbrow, in both *Room 207* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, an earlier novel written by Mpe, is an inhabitable site characterised by trauma and urban bleakness. According to Mavengano (2020), the unhomeliness of the urban space displays the paradoxes of (un) belonging in un/

changing cultural, political and national space despite the attempt to create a new humanism that transcends colonial and apartheid divisions. The Chiawelo house in Soweto Township owned by Bafana's family, has cracks and is invaded by cockroaches that metaphorically suggest the cracks or fault lines in the post-apartheid society. The township in post-apartheid era is still a physical terrain that speaks of disease, death, impoverishment, violence, vulnerability, sexual promiscuity and suffering. The post-apartheid period is also marked by corruption among black government officials. In *After Tears*, government officials are involved in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) housing scandal, which further denies the poor space for decent accommodation. It could be argued that ordinary black South Africans are frustrated with the ANC government and this triggers aggression, service delivery protests and xenophobic attacks. The novels do not offer optimistic visions of life but, rather, exhibit an apocalyptic purgatory of the future of postcolonial subjects.

Recently, the ANC government utilised the COVID-19 pandemic to justify forced deportation of African immigrants, including Zimbabweans. Certainly, the selected novels offer a scathing attack on authoritarian, corrupt, hypocritical and egocentric post-colonial politicians, reminding us of Achebe's (1967) *A Man of the People*. Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope*, frames the contested representation of the existing conditions of underprivileged postcolonial subjects. Ironically, the post-colony is under 'the control of the black man' and has become a land where the 'weak, the poor, the rich and the powerful – powerful enough that they can rob you of your own life, mingle and mend' (Moele, 2006, p. 69). It is disheartening to observe that postcolonial black leaders enrich themselves and forget about the welfare of ordinary people who are forced to be silent in their misery. In the novel *After Tears*, Chi residents become foragers who attend funerals and parties called 'after tears' simply to get food. This underlines their despicable state (Mavengano, 2020). Nina, a character in the novel, makes these remarks:

> Look at how full this place is! Somehow, I don't think that they all come to pay their last respect to the deceased. These people are just here to eat because they live in poverty. (Mhlongo, 2007, p. 197)

These novels convey the murkiness of existence and uncertain trajectories of postcolonial subjects, who are materially impoverished. In numerous ways, these texts emphasise the anxieties related to the future of postcolonial states. The fictional narratives condemn postcolonial leaders, who have become tormentors of their people and generate misery and suffering (Mavengano, 2020). The much-celebrated political struggles against colonialism and apartheid did not benefit the common man. Mavengano (2020) further notes that fictional writers from both Zimbabwe and South Africa, have textualised titles such as, *After Tears, Room 207, Dog Eat Dog, The Uncertainty of Hope, This Mournable Body, One Foreigner's Ordeal, Harare North, Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *We Need New Names*, to etch bitter political satire that sustains what Gilroy (2005) calls 'postcolonial melancholia'.

The precariat's conviviality with power in the post-colony

Mbembe (2001) observes that postcolonial subjects, in some circumstances, become accomplices in the grotesque autocracies, which dominate them. The 'disciplined bodies' of the postcolonial subjects participate in obscene displays of power. For example, some

South Africans uncritically attack, beat up and kill African foreigners in their country. The state plays an influential role in the processes of Othering African foreigners through the media and politically loaded discourses in South Africa. Some ANC politicians utilise these incendiary discourses for political mileage, zombification of citizens and diversion of the public's attention from the current and burning failures by the ruling party to provide employment and other essential services. The oppressed are, in turn, zombified as postcolonial subjects and become impotent to resist the necropolitical 'mechanisms of violence, internalise authoritarian epistemology' and participate in some form of conviviality with the ruling elite (Mbembe, 2001, p. 129). Some ordinary South Africans gullibly turn against fellow African victims of postcolonial African leaders. The African immigrant is generally despised, segregated and spoken of in derogatory terms as alien, criminal and *kwerekwere*. This is the stance taken in *Room 207*. The Zulu-boy epitomises a discriminatory mindset in South Africa, which was inherited from apartheid era and continues to be fomented by some of the present political leaders. Readers are told that Zulu-boy:

> . . . didn't like *makwerekwere*, he hated the Pedis even more. He associated every individual with their tribe or the land that they were from. For him, the Zulus were the supreme race and after that, everybody was subhuman, 'lama Pedi'. Don't blame him, he inherited that from somewhere in our past. No matter what you were, if you were black, he liked to know what tribe you were from (Moele, 2006, p. 65).

The representational language used to describe 'African foreigners' and some Othered bodies in South Africa, is encoded in stereotypes, binary oppositions, demonisation, criminalisation and rejection of the subaltern Other. Such constructs established by both members of the public and political leaders, denigrate and dehumanise immigrants and other ethnic groups who assume the status of the *homo sacer/*non-persons and become the focus of abuse, surveillance and exploitation.

This is a problematic aspect in post-apartheid South Africa that is incongruent with the discourse of the rainbow national imperative and renaissance. In *After Tears*, the African immigrants become a scapegoat for all the social ills in South Africa. Zinhle blames Vimbai for Bafana's reckless and illegal actions. When Vimbai, a Zimbabwean who is Bafana's friend, queries whether the latter had actually lied about his law degree results, Zinhle furiously replies 'Yes, he was a very nice boy until he began associating with you foreigners' (Mhlongo, 2007, p. 218). Zinhle's accusation amplifies and demonstrates the preconceptions constructed around Othered bodies in South Africa. It is a diametrical classification of people as insiders/outsiders, citizens/non-citizens, moral/immoral and natives/foreigners. The ANC's power promotes stigmatisation and surveillance of the 'Other' through 'stripping of rights' and conferring of il/legal status (Agamben, 2005). Mavengano (2020) posits that there is need to rethink the conceptualisation of Africanness/blackness and the meanings encoded in Pan-Africanism and Negritude philosophies, which apparently become hollow in the present treatment of the African migrant in South Africa. Postcolonial leaders exhibit double standards and hypocrisy, making it difficult to create meaningful conversations and establish positive relations across the continent. The figure of the African immigrant is that of a perpetual victim. Yet, it should be noted that the tropes of non-arrival and nomadic trajectories in *Room 207* and *After Tears*, convey the plight of both African immigrants and the precariat in post-apartheid South African society. The unhoused postcolonial subjects are doomed to flee

forever in search of a home and security. Bafana and Noko, the protagonists in the novels *After Tears* and *Room 207* respectively, are examples of such characters whose sense of home and belonging are shattered despite being native South Africans. Rea, Bafana's mother, has this to say about their house in Soweto, 'all the memories in this place are bad ones' (Mhlongo, 2007, p. 25), registering her lack of attachment to this township home.

Likewise, the city serves as a metonym or a synecdoche of the national space that is not yet a home for poor black people. The principal characters have no sense of place. In another enlightening scene, Noko, a protagonist-narrator in *Room 207*, wishes to leave Hillbrow and never come back:

> Someday, I'm not going to miss this place, period. I'll be happy to move far away from it and, when I have moved far away, I will never visit, even to pay homage, because there'll be no reason to do that (Moele, 2006, p. 167).

The same desire to escape the spatial drudgery and misery is demonstrated by Onai, Katy and John in *The Uncertainty of Hope*. These characters are tired of living in the impoverished Mbare high density suburb in Harare and Onai laments her sorry state and wishes to own a house in Borrowdale, the low-density suburb par excellence in the Zimbabwean cityscape. Whereas, Katy and John bought a stand to build a house in an upper-middle class Malbereign suburb, the quest to leave Mbare is caused by the pathetic conditions that prevail in the high-density suburb. In the novel, *After Tears*, Mhlongo employs visual imagery, satirical language, metaphors and symbolism to question the depressing post-apartheid conditions. Nyawana's deformity figuratively speaks of the ills and 'battered' bodies in post-apartheid South Africa. The celebration of the dawn of the 'New Millennium' is brief and marked by Nyawana's injury by the firecrackers that eventually cause his death. The New Millennium festivities symbolically capture the ordinary people's short-lived optimism and ecstasy at independence but Nyawana's injury, during the celebrations and death, symbolises cynicism towards the tepid jubilation of the postcolonial subjects who are denied a moment to enjoy economic and political freedoms. Independence, for these characters, remains an elusive idea that has lost its semantic meaning hence, blaming African immigrants for the ills that haunt the post-apartheid society is evidence of this conviviality with power.

The same can be said about the Zimbabwean state's repressive apparatuses (the army and police) who, are, themselves, victims of poor governance, ailing economy, high inflation rate and poor service delivery, but still act in self-contradictory ways when they participate in corrupt forms of power in what Mbembe (2001) describes as overzealous 'cheap imitations of power'. These zombified state agents, who are victims of the same system, which they protect, are immune to punishment. They implement state-sponsored violence against the post-colonial *homo sacer*. Residents of Mbare who became victims of state violence during the 2005 *Operation Murambatsvina programme*, are hounded and forced to live in open space at Tsiga Grounds, under refugee camp-like conditions. 'It was clear that the camp [Tsiga Grounds] was a health hazard' (Tagwira, 2006, p. 155). The spectacle is captured in this excerpt:

> Mbare was the worst affected, by virtue of its level of overcrowding and social deprivation. People were constantly on the move with their families and possessions, just looking for open spaces in which to erect makeshift shelters. It did not help that the police were persistently on

> the lookout for such illegal dwellings. So, the nomads continued on their difficult journey in the unremittingly cold weather, miserable, hungry families who'd lost all hope of a future. (Tagwira, 2006, p. 154)

The human-animal distinction is blurred in this unsanitised depiction of how residents are displaced and treated in dastardly ways by state apparatuses. The crude power depicted here, conveys the compelling dictator in Zimbabwean literary works written and published in post-2000 era, such as Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, Chikwava's *Harare North*, Jinga's *One Foreigner's Ordeal* and Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope*. These narratives expose the obscenity of power through political satire that ridicules the troubled national space and the crippling post-independence conditions. The performativity of power is instrumental in controlling and silencing those who seek to challenge injustices in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

Post-Independence anxiety and uncertainty

The fictional narratives examined in this article present characters who are overwhelmed by the untenable postcolonial existential conditions in which life is fraught with emotional anguish, agitation, liminality and uncertainty experienced by the citizens. The degeneration of life in the postcolonial urban space, in both Zimbabwe and South Africa, is projected symbolically through the ubiquitous presence of prostitutes, vagrants and fractured personal and familial relations. In *The Uncertainty of Hope*, Mawaya, a self-made Mbare vagrant, metonymically represents the plight of the marginalised urban population in post-independence in Zimbabwe. He is:

> Spotted competing with stray dogs for rare bits of food from people's bins [because] nobody could afford to throw away anything that was remotely edible, nowadays … Both Mawaya and the neighbourhood's stray dogs looked like walking skeletons. Mawaya's cheek bones jutted out like twin peaks on his gaunt face. Onai had, no doubt, that under his mass of rags, you could count the bones of his ribcage. (Tagwira, 2006, p. 57)

This is further intensified by the dilapidation of the national infrastructure, poor service delivery, unemployment which are tropes of the ruined postcolonial states. The pervasive motifs of anxiety and abjection, particularly in Zimbabwean fictional narratives, speak of the mournable national space that has lost its glory and transformed its citizens into the wretched of the earth (Dangarembga, 2018; Fanon, 1961/2007). The impoverished Mbare residential area re-inscribes the wretchedness in Marechera's (1978) *House of Hunger*, which generates schizophrenia among those whose lives are under severe uncertainty and live in terrains of danger on the margins of the postcolonial society. This depiction of the postcolonial Zimbabwean society underscores precarity and abjection of the underclass, whose lives are invisible and unworthy thereby, conveying a pervasive and grim situation. The irony and glaring contradiction in post-independent Zimbabwe is that the national space is characterised by economic and health woes, grime and crime, dilapidation of infrastructure, perennial queues, hyperinflation and empty shops. The impoverished state of Onai's children adds to the negative images constructed to project anguish of the common citizen and the bleakness of the future in postcolonial Zimbabwean society.

Sheila is a self-proclaimed ex-prostitute, whose fear of hunger had been greater than her fear of AIDS, and lives in open space at Tsiga Grounds. Her health quickly deteriorated and she later died. The *Murambatsvina* (Operation Clean Trash) is part of ZANU-PF's necropolitical exercise of power over the vulnerable, cocooned and zombified citizens, as depicted through an uncritical conviviality with the sovereign's authoritarian nationalism.

Melody is a university student who has an 'affaire' with Chanda, a married man, in order to simply survive. Her character conveys the dilemma of the postcolonial female subject when she responds to Faith, her friend who had cautioned her for dating a married man:

> [D]o you think this is what I wanted for myself? This is what I have to do, not what I want. For the first time since I came to varsity, I haven't had to scrounge and get by on one meal a day … or have you passed me your left-overs. (Tagwira, 2006, p. 81)

Melody further retorts, '[b]lame the economy for forcing me into a corner' (Tagwira, 2006, p. 80). Faith is extremely worried about the vulnerability of women and maintains as follows:

> She thought of the many Zimbabwean women flouting socially and lawfully acceptable [norms] to fend for their children. Women woefully shackling themselves to unsuitable men, because life offered nothing better or so they had concluded. She thought of all the women who yearn for some kind of freedom, women who were too afraid to seek it out, or embrace it. Chaminuka would definitely have wept for the daughters of Zimbabwe. Yes, that beast called the 'economy' had a lot to answer for. (Tagwira, 2006, p. 82)

These unsettling problems leave the postcolonial subjects with nagging feelings of resignation, disorientation and a profound sense of insecurity. There is no prospect of socio-economic emancipation in the postcolonial Zimbabwe. The dehumanising living conditions ultimately lead to total disillusionment (Mavengano & Hove, 2019).

The post-apartheid city is a zone of high crime, a site infested with sexual promiscuity, denigration of women whose '*ntepa*' or female genital is viewed as a destructive tool, sexist language, violence, desperation, HIV and AIDS, abject poverty, frustration all converge to construct 'a sad black story' (Moele, 2006, p. 40). More disturbingly, Johannesburg is a 'dream city where dreams die each and every second, as each and every second dreams are born' (Moele, 2006, p. 19). It is important to read Johannesburg as a microcosmic setting representing the existential experiences of common black South Africans in the post-apartheid society. The lure of Johannesburg city runs parallel with the euphoria at independence to heighten frustration and disillusionment in postcolonial societies. The narrator regards the suffering of the masses to be a result of 'black betrayal' (Moele 2006, p. 145). The selected novels employ garbage, filth, degeneration, squalor, decay and excretory imagery to describe Mbare in Harare, Chiawelo in Soweto Township and Hillbrow in Johannesburg. The narratives register disgust and revulsion evoked by the sordid state of postcolonial subjects. Readers are told that 'Hillbrow streets are dirty' (Moele, 2006, p. 158), and in *The Uncertainty of Hope*, there are 'rivulets of sewage' in Mbare streets. The sewage serves as metaphor of national decay and is reinforced by 'collapsing economy and health system' in post-independent Zimbabwean society, harping back to the genealogy of excreta as emblematic of the postcolony as witnessed in

Wole Soyinka's (1965) *The Interpreters* and Ayi Kwei Armah's (1968) *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Readers have a glimpse into the macabre and the grotesque in Mbare in the following description:

> Mbare was a high-density township that had absolutely no redeeming features to speak of. The degree of overcrowding was spectacular. As the tasteless joke went, one could not reach out an arm without touching one's next-door neighbours - and their beds, too. A multitude of tiny houses were stacked against one another making an intricate maze of carelessly planned streets. This housing itself was a colonial inheritance, then it had been considered suitable accommodation for the township-dwellers. Overcrowding during the war and, since independence, had only made matters worse. Contrary to people's expectations, the services had deteriorated. (Tagwira, 2006, p. 52)

Mbare, just like Soweto Township in *After Tears*, is depicted as an impoverished, neglected and crime-ridden site.

In another illuminating scene, Noko, the narrator/protagonist in *Room 207*, walks naked in Hillbrow streets. His nakedness amplifies the precarity of the postcolonial subject and further intensifies the bare life of this and other characters. Noko's nudity symbolically speaks of vulnerability encoded in his naked life. Post-colonial subjects endure life and are driven by a quest for re-humanisation, but the naked black body reinforces their false hope, dashed enthusiasm and mockery of the naïve euphoria at independence. Such dystopic representation of the postcolonial era subverts the idealised notions of black self-rule. The narrator/protagonist in *Room 207*, assumes the figure of *homo sacer*, the image of a suffering body denied political and social protection. In *The Uncertainty of Hope*, state violence, HIV and AIDS, hunger and poverty amplify vulnerability, urban bleakness and precarity of Mbare residents. Mbare is a metonymic representation of postcolonial Zimbabwean society, which is a politicised national space or zone of exception as read in Agamben, characterised by perpetual fear and the state's hellish disciplinary mechanisms of political intransigence highlighted in Nyambi et al. (2020). Hondo, a character in *The Uncertainty of Hope*, commits suicide after his house is demolished by the police. What makes his case unique is that Hondo is a former liberation combatant, but he is not spared by the brutal apparatuses of the state. His death attests to the government's callous attitude towards its citizens during *Operation Murambatsvina*.

The '*Homo Sacer*' of the post-colony: living without rights

According to Mbembe (2001), the postcolonial leadership's sadistic attitude towards citizens is a form of disciplinary power. The display of its power to punish is a strategic instrument that the state utilises to silence and subdue its subjects. The spectacular violent tactics remind the postcolonial subjects of the presence and visibility of the sovereign power. The state of exception permits the use of dictatorial elements as demonstrated through *Operation Murambatsvina* in Zimbabwe. The Robert Mugabe-led government acted violently and without restraint. In the state of exception, 'the sovereign has legal power to suspend the validity of the law, [and] legally places himself outside the law' (Agamben, 1998, p. 15). Similarly, for Mbembe (2003), necropolitics concerns the deployment of mundane violence. The postcolonial urban space in Zimbabwe is a site of terror, rights stripping and denial of membership where the citizens experience moments

of intense uncertainty and dehumanisation as they are banished to other spaces where they become both anonymous and invisible. Citizenship and individual rights are diminished and suspended as the sovereign extends its power and some lives are marked as unworthy of living. Such lives, therefore, can be disposed (Agamben, 2005). The citizen is stripped of rights and denied human value. The police, as 'petty sovereigns' in their own right, serve to implement the coercive acts of banishment against the *homo sacer* figure thereby, maintaining the status quo. The state agents utilise the grotesque semiotics of power or *masimba* from the ruling party to discipline the banished bodies. The narratives studied in this article employ satire, an aesthetics of the grotesque and absurd as conscious stylistic strategies to convey and subvert the vulgarity of the sovereign power. Mbembe (2001), in his assessment of the post-colony, posits that the postcolonial subjects are denied personhood. Mbembe, 2003) postulates that the state confers the status of 'living dead' to ostracised persons. Nichols (2019) also notes that post-apartheid novels deconstruct sanitised national narratives of newness and freedom through ironic portrayals of the embeddedness of apartheid structures of spatial containment and regimes of domination.

Disillusionment and feelings of resignation are part of thematic constructions in the studied literary works that reflect the unpalatable reality in the postcolonial states and inconsistencies that exist between political rhetoric and practices of the ruling elite. Mbare residents, who become victims of *Murambatsvina*, are treated in the same way as African migrants in South Africa, who assume a new form of bare life as 'stateless persons'. Their bare lives are illustrative of precarity. The African 'other' is treated as one who occupies a zone of non-being and is denied state protection, therefore, can be abused, discriminated or eliminated. Vimbai, a Zimbabwean immigrant in South Africa, is stripped of legal rights and becomes a precarious non-citizen. Despite the fact that she received her education in South Africa and became a medical doctor, her status as a non-citizen closes doors for employment opportunities. The administrative practices of creating barriers within the national space threaten the very effort made by migrants to lead a dignified survival in South Africa. Her experience is symbolic of bare life and the insignificance of the black African immigrant bodies in South Africa. The citizen/non-citizen dichotomy is interrogated in the novels *After Tears* and *Room 207*. The sanitised political rhetoric in the post-apartheid narrative of the rainbow nation in South Africa loses its semantic value and becomes part of the necropolitics and vulgarity of the ruling ANC. This empty political rhetoric is subverted by the discriminatory attitudes and racism that continue to prevail in South Africa (Alexander, 2004). Othering black African immigrants, especially demonstrated through what Jukka (2018, p. 145) calls 'administrative bordering practices of non-citizens', is reminiscent of historical separatist apartheid state architecture. The apartheid vestiges are encoded in such attitudes suggesting that efforts towards national and continental integration are only a part of a receding horizon. The migration policies created by the sovereign deny and limit mobility rights making re-humanisation of the perceived 'Other' problematic in contemporary South Africa. This is explained through Mbembe's (2003) deployment of the concept 'necropower', which suggests the logic of conferring life and taking it at will in the form of literal or metaphorical killing. Mbembe (2003, p. 27) further explains necropower as referring to the 'dynamics of territorial fragmentation, the sealing off and expansion of settlement'. He contends that necropower is the political condition that seeks to render mobility impossible and entrenches separation.

The state creates exception, such as in the present discourse of the COVID-19 pandemic, to suspend the rule of law and state violence and human rights violations are normalised. For example, as already mentioned above, recently, the governments of Botswana and South Africa used the COVID-19 pandemic to arrest and deport African immigrants. The COVID-19 pandemic is used to create a state of emergency to bring into effect, subtle political ends. In a different context, Butler (2004) raises an insightful observation when she states that the body that cannot be humanised, means it does not fit into the schema of being human. Once the body is dehumanised, it becomes vulnerable to abuse. The legal status of the individual is obliterated as the body becomes a mere object and violence is directed at it without restraint. In this sense, the state of exception is utilised to dehumanise exceptional bodies. During the Coronavirus pandemic, immigrants have been living at the mercy of the governments (Gordon, 2010). This clearly shows that the legacy of colonialism still haunts those at the bottom of society, especially in Southern Africa. The very essence of the liberation struggle is betrayed since the masses in the postcolonial era, continue to languish in poverty and the leaders have turned into egocentric and autocratic rulers as epitomised by the Police Inspector, Nzou, who is an illegal foreign currency dealer in *The Uncertainty of Hope*.

Concluding remarks

In view of the above reflections, it is apparent that postcolonial subjects experience a sense of disorientation as they live unsheltered lives, which are figuratively suggested by the loss of the RDP and Chiawelo houses by Bafana's family in *After Tears* and the necropolitical act of demolition of the sources of livelihood for Mbare residents in *The Uncertainty of Hope*. The selected fictional narratives in this article interrogate and problematise authoritarianism, parochialism, necropolitical mechanisms of domination and narcissistic tendencies by postcolonial leaders who create *homo sacer* bodies. The discriminatory attitudes of the South African government inscribe invisibility of black immigrants and amplify their pathetic conditions and fragility of African sojourners, who are excluded from the juridical protections of citizenship in South Africa. African immigrant's bare life projected through surveillance, deportation and delegitimation was debated *vis-à-vis* the complication and dissonance that arise in discourses about the Rainbow nation, African renaissance and decolonisation, which speak about re-humanisation of previously marginalised people, equality, social justice and renewal. It seems, the more things change, the more they remain the same. The colonial and apartheid binary logic persists in the disquieting conditions of the postcolonies. The narratives studied deploy satire of the grotesque to interrogate and critique the postcolonial semiotics and vulgarity of power. Yet, it is also pertinent to note that even in the most dastardly circumstances of bare lives under states of excerptions, there are crevices and fissures that show that ordinary people are never entirely overwhelmed. Some form of resistance is registered in one way or another.

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